Creativity in the Korean Studio System

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Abstract

This study examines how the establishment of the "Korean-style studio system," driven by the expansion of global OTT platforms, has reconfigured the creative environment for South Korean content creators. Through in-depth interviews with veteran writers, directors, and producers, this research analyzes the paradoxical effects of this new industrial structure. While the studio system offers unprecedented financial opportunities and improved production conditions, it simultaneously constrains creative autonomy by shifting power from creators to platforms and capital. The study finds that creative decision-making is increasingly subordinated to the demands of the global market, particularly in casting, leading to the marginalization of writers and directors in the creative process. Despite these systemic pressures, creators maintain a core ethical commitment to telling universally resonant stories of ordinary people, identifying this as the essential value of their work. The paper concludes that this new system presents a structural dilemma where industrial success is achieved at the potential cost of creative control, threatening the long-term sustainability of the Korean content ecosystem´s unique strengths.

Keywords: creativity, studio, OTT platform, production, financialization

1. Introduction

The content industry is fundamentally characterized by its capacity to generate added value through the innovation of its factors of production. The success and sustained growth of content companies hinge on their ability to secure a continuous stream of creative talent, alongside an influx of new technology and capital, to ensure a stable supply of innovative content. Consequently, creativity has long been recognized as one of the most pivotal concepts within the cultural industries.

Hollywood, widely regarded as the global epicenter of cultural industries spanning film, broadcasting, and music, has successfully institutionalized creativity as a modern form of labor, thereby establishing itself as the world´s preeminent content production hub.[1] Having solidified its status as a major filmmaking center by the 1920s, Hollywood operated a distinctive labor organization known as the "studio system," which integrated structured work routines with the realization of artistic expression. This system, which professionalized production personnel across various sectors and bound them through wage or contractual relationships, evolved into the paradigmatic production model for modern cultural industries by synergizing artistic creativity with economic efficiency.

The twin forces of neoliberal globalization and digitalization have profoundly reshaped labor environments not only in Hollywood but across the globe. Since the 1980s, deregulation and privatization have become dominant global policy trends, prompting many nations to dismantle public media services and permit transnational investment. The advent of new technologies such as satellites, cable, and the internet precipitated an explosion in channel proliferation, enabling major Hollywood media conglomerates to evolve into multi-platform global corporations by forging global production chains through mergers with local channels and production companies. In pursuit of enhanced profitability, these media giants invested heavily in securing franchise brands and popular creators while simultaneously exploring multifaceted cost-reduction strategies, including outsourcing to independent production companies and selecting production locales that offered tax incentives and lower wages. This spatial reorganization of content production intensified competition among workers in production bases offering lower wages and more precarious employment, thereby exacerbating the power asymmetry between individual creators and employers.

However, this transnational mode of media production also furnished local content producers with opportunities to enter the global market, elevating previously overlooked nations into key players in the "creative economy." The Korean Wave (*Hallyu*), which originated in East Asia in the late 1990s and has since achieved worldwide proliferation, stands as a notable outcome of deregulated media production and global distribution. Since the 1990s, South Korea has actively pursued policies to dismantle its state-controlled broadcasting system in favor of expanding private broadcasting and outsourced production. While the government´s initial efforts to diversify content supply and bolster domestic production capabilities in the multi-channel era were constrained by inequitable power dynamics between terrestrial broadcasters and independent production companies, a significant shift began with the launch of four private general programming channels following the 2009 amendment of the *Broadcasting Act*. This, coupled with the enhanced production capacities of select cable channels and entertainment management

1
Ronny Regev, "Hollywood Works: How Creativity Become Labor in the Studio System", *Enterprise & Society* 17, no.3 (2016): 591-617, https://doi.org/10.1017/eso.2015.89

firms, initiated a migration of key production personnel from legacy broadcasters to emerging enterprises.[2] The launch of Studio Dragon and the entry of Netflix into Korea in 2016 signaled the potential for large-scale production projects, catalyzing a mass exodus of creators to specialized production studios. Creators who were once affiliated with public broadcasters and bound by a "public service" ethos began migrating to studios in pursuit of superior financial compensation and greater creative autonomy.

The "Korean-style studio system" that emerged from this transition exhibits features that are qualitatively different from those of conventional production companies. Studios, leveraging their financial prowess, now spearhead the entire production process from inception to completion, and possess the formidable negotiating power to own or co-own intellectual property (IP)—a right previously monopolized by broadcasters. Major studios, led by the paradigmatic Studio Dragon, have achieved rapid growth by recruiting renowned creators, acquiring numerous "labels," and offering substantial financial rewards through mechanisms such as stock exchanges.[3][4] As a consequence, the Korean content industry now operates unequivocally under a studio system.

This industrial reconfiguration, however, has engendered a new set of challenges. The immense demand from global OTT platforms has precipitated a sharp escalation in production costs, intensifying monopolization by a handful of large production companies and leading domestic broadcasters to curtail their programming, thereby fostering ecosystem instability. Furthermore, as creators transition to studios, they confront fundamental transformations in their production processes, financial compensation structures, and professional ethics.

While existing scholarship has examined the business strategies of studios and the evolution of the production environment, there remains a significant lacuna in the research concerning how these structural shifts specifically impact the creative practices of individual creators and their strategic responses. This study is situated precisely at this intersection. It aims to conduct an analysis of how the Korean-style studio system organizes creators and, in turn, how creators navigate this new system to express and, at times, refract their creativity. To this end, this study seeks to answer its core questions through in-depth interviews with writers, directors, and producers of dramas and entertainment programs. Through their vivid, firsthand accounts, the ultimate objective is to critically examine how the Korean-style studio system mediates and transforms creativity in the age of platform capitalism, and to elucidate its broader sociocultural implications.

2. Cultural Industry and Creativity

Historically, the concept of creativity has been centered on the expressive power or innate talent of individual artists. This perspective—rooted in the Western Romantic tradition that regards creativity as a product of mystical or divine inspiration, and in psychological approaches that frame it as a matter of individual personality or cognitive ability—gained significant traction within the cultural industries. It fostered a view that mythologized individuals of genius-like talent, arguing for the necessity of nurturing and protecting them.[5][6]

Particularly since the work of J. P. Guilford in the 1950s, creativity has come to be defined as a measurable individual trait. His establishment of metrics for creative potential, such as "divergent thinking," brought attention to methods

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June-Hee Jung, "Emerging Media Conglomerates and Producers' Exodus: The Dynamics of Creativity Relocations in the South Korean Broadcasting Production Sector after the Introduction of New General Programming Channels", *Korean journal of communication and information* 66 (2014):28-58.

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Ayoung Kim, "Global Industrialization and Proactive Adaptation in the Broadcasting Industry: Focusing on Studio Transformation and Platform Habitus in the Era of Netflix" (PhD diss., Sogang University, 2023).

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Yeran Kim, "디지털 한류와 창의적 생산자의 탄생", *Hallyu Now* 54 (2023):18-22.

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Andy C. Pratt and Paul Jeffcutt, eds., *Creativity, Innovation and the Cultural Economy*, 1st ed. (London: Routledge, 2009), https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203880012

for identifying creative individuals and enhancing their abilities. Based on this perspective, psychological studies have presented two standard criteria for defining creativity: originality and usefulness.[7]

This individualistic approach, however, faced criticism for overlooking the social context in which creativity is manifested. The argument was that the acceptance of an idea or product as new and valuable is less an inherent property of the object itself than the outcome of a process of social evaluation and recognition. This claim gained considerable support through Mihaly Csikszentmihalayi´s systemic approach (1988, 325; 1999, 315), which posits an interaction among the "individual," the "domain," and the "field."[8][9] In this model, the individual generates novelty by drawing upon the knowledge and rules of a specific domain, while the field—comprised of a group of experts—evaluates the outcome to determine its creativity. In essence, for an idea to be deemed creative, it must pass through the evaluative filter of "gatekeeping" groups, such as critics or curators, a process that is itself a core component of creativity.

The assertion that creativity is a socially constructed phenomenon rather than an objective attribute is further reinforced by social network theory. From this vantage point, creativity is not the product of an isolated individual but is realized through social networks, where ideas and information are exchanged. Ronald S. Burt´s concept of "structural holes," for instance, contends that the position of a "broker" connecting disparate networks is conducive to generating novel ideas, as creative combinations are more likely to arise at the intersection of diverse knowledge streams.[10]

As informal interaction and collaboration became recognized as key drivers of creativity in sectors like advertising and design, the formation of clusters to foster knowledge exchange was politically encouraged.[11][12] This conceptual shift prompted a trend in cultural organizations toward dismantling the boundaries between creation, planning, and strategy, in favor of integrated collaboration. Consequently, creativity was redefined not as the exclusive purview of a specific department but as a holistic, multidimensional process geared toward problem-solving.[13]

However, the intensification of commercialism in media content precipitated arguments that individual creativity must be understood within the political-economic context of value creation and commodification for profit generation.[14][15] Critical scholars examining the relationship between creativity and the cultural industries have conducted multi-layered analyses of how creativity is constrained and distorted by neoliberal commercialism, technological advancement, and concentrated corporate ownership.[16][17][18][19]

David Hesmondhalgh (2019), in particular, offers a comprehensive approach by situating creativity within the economic structures of the cultural industries. He contends that because these industries operate within a capitalist economy, their prioritization of profitability often leads to restrictions on creative expression. He points out that industry strategies such as genre conventions, star power, and serialization—employed as mechanisms to minimize the risk of commercial failure—simultaneously present creators with both opportunities for innovation and significant commercial constraints. Furthermore, in the process of transforming creative ideas into commodities, the mechanisms of the cultural industries create a stark divide between a few highly compensated superstars and a vast pool of cultural laborers willing to endure precarious conditions, resulting in widespread low wages and job insecurity.[20][21][22][23]

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Mads Møller T. Andersen, *Researching Creativity in Media Industries*. (Lanham: Lexington, 2022)

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Mark A. Runco and Garrett J. Jaeger. "The Standard Definition of Creativity", *Creativity Research Journal* 24, no.1(2012):92-96. doi: 10.1080/10400419.2012.650092

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Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, "Society, Culture, and Person: A Systems View of Creativity," in *The Nature of Creativity: Contemporary Psychological Perspectives*, ed. Robert J. Sternberg (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 325-39.

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Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, "Implications of a Systems Perspective for the Study of Creativity," in *Handbook of Creativity*, ed. Robert J. Sternberg (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 313-35.

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Ronald S. Burt, "Structural Holes and Good Ideas," *American Journal of Sociology* 110, no. 2 (2004): 349-99.

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Andy C. Pratt, "Advertising and Creativity, a Governance Approach: A Case Study of Creative Agencies in London," Environment and Planning A 38, no. 10 (2006): 1883-99.

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Allen J. Scott, *The Cultural Economy of Cities: Essays on the Geography of Image-Producing Industries* (London: Sage Publications, 2000).

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Pratt and Jeffcutt, *Creativity, Innovation and the Cultural Economy*.

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Matthew P. McAllister, *The Commercialization of American Culture: New Advertising, Control, and Democracy* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1996).

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Janet Wasko, Mark Phillips, and Chris Purdie, "Hollywood Meets Madison Avenue: The Commercialization of US Films," *Media, Culture & Society* 15, no. 2 (1993): 271-93.

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Mark Banks, *The Politics of Cultural Work* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230288713

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David Hesmondhalgh, *The Cultural Industries*, 4th ed. (Los Angeles: Sage Publications, 2019).

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Angela McRobbie, *Everyone Is Creative: Artists as Pioneers of the New Economy* (London: Routledge-Cavendish, 2004).

These deteriorating labor conditions have been exacerbated by globalization. Miller et al. (2019), focusing on the globalization of cultural industries, observe that the expansion of Hollywood has led to the offshoring of film production to low-wage countries, thereby intensifying labor exploitation and precarity.[24] Similarly, Curtin and Sanson (2016) emphasize that the consolidation of global media corporations has not only amplified the commercial pressures on creators but also increased job instability across diverse sectors.[25] They acknowledge, however, that these global production networks can provide growth opportunities for local cultural industries.

Concurrent with globalization, the advancement of digital media technologies has significantly contributed to the development of production capabilities in peripheral nations. By providing affordable production tools, these technologies lower the barriers to entry for media creation, thereby fostering the democratization of the production process. They also offer expanded opportunities for experimentation and innovation in visual content creation, broadening the scope of creative practice.[26] Proponents of the "creative economy," who champion the economic potential of innovation, have viewed globalization and digitalization optimistically, influencing the adoption of "creative industries" policies by major developed nations in the late 1990s.[27] They argue that the rising importance of creativity in emerging economies necessitates policy support across a broader range of fields, including arts, crafts, and fashion.

Yet, the neoliberal discourse of the creative industries, with its emphasis on economic incentives, has faced sharp criticism for obscuring the deterioration of actual working conditions and for justifying labor exploitation.[2829] Miller (2014) argues that the rhetoric of "creativity" and "innovation" has effectively shifted the blame for structural industry problems onto individual workers.[30] McRobbie (2020), exploring women´s labor and creativity, critiques how concepts such as "autonomy" and "flexibility" are used to rationalize precarious employment and low wages, encouraging acceptance of poor conditions under the guise of resilience.[31]

The persistent debate framing creativity and commercialism as oppositional forces has been sustained by concerns over the external influence of capital, power, and technology on creative practice. In reality, however, creativity and commercialism are intricately interwoven, shaping business models, marketing strategies, genre conventions, and modes of creation and consumption.[32] Platforms, in particular, which integrate media infrastructure and employ algorithms to quantify public attention, can enhance creativity by providing innovative tools for content development. Nonlinear viewing on digital platforms has increased demand for works with complex narratives, affording creators greater latitude for creative storytelling and genre experimentation.[33]

Poell, Nieborg, and Duffy (2021) observe how the "platformization" of cultural industries reconfigures creativity under commercial and technological pressures.[34] They argue that platforms consolidate producer relations by providing the economic and material conditions to develop, distribute, market, and monetize cultural content by leveraging openness, ownership, and technological affordances.[35] In other words, while the production logic tied to platform algorithms exists in tension with traditional notions of creativity such as insight or genius, it transforms modes of creative production by establishing new creative norms through vast audience data. The authors identify four such norms on platforms—nichification, quantification, branding, and authenticity—and caution that viewing these merely as instruments of control is overly simplistic and technologically deterministic. Instead, creators

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Toby Miller et al., *Global Hollywood 2* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2019).
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Banks, *Politics of Cultural Work*.
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Michael Curtin and Kevin Sanson, *"Precarious Creativity: Global Media, Local Labor,"* in Precarious Creativity: Global Media, Local Labor, ed. Michael Curtin and Kevin Sanson (Oakland: University of California Press, 2016), 1-18.
22
Angela McRobbie, *Be Creative: Making a Living in the New Culture Industries* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2016).
23
Andrew Ross, *Nice Work If You Can Get It: Life and Labor in Precarious Times* (New York: New York University Press, 2009).
24
Miller et al., *Global Hollywood 2*.
25
Curtin and Sanson, "Precarious Creativity," 1-18.
26
John Thornton Caldwell, *Production Culture: Industrial Reflexivity and Critical Practice in Film and Television* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008).
27
John Hartley et al., *Key Concepts in Creative Industries* (London: Sage Publications, 2013).
28
Angela McRobbie, *Feminism and the Politics of Resilience: Essays on Gender, Media and the End of Welfare* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2020).
29
Toby Miller, "Cultural Work and Creative Industries," in *The Cultural Intermediaries Reader*, eds. Jennifer Smith Maguire and Julian Matthews (London: Sage Publications, 2014), 25-33.
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Miller, "Cultural Work and Creative Industries," 25-33.
31
McRobbie, *Feminism and the Politics of Resilience*.
32
Keith Negus, "Where the Mystical Meets the Market: Creativity and Commerce in the Production of Popular Music," *The Sociological Review* 43, no. 2 (1995): 316-41.
33
Amanda D. Lotz, *The Television Will Be Revolutionized*, 2nd ed. (New York: New York University Press, 2014).
34
Thomas Poell, David Nieborg, and Brooke Erin Duffy, *Platforms and Cultural Production* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2021).

autonomously conduct their creative practices within these patterned norms to attract greater public attention.

Another mechanism that platforms impose is the encouragement of creators to envision and develop themselves as financial asset holders and entrepreneurs. Platform media, operating within the mechanisms of financial capital, transforms creative work into concepts of future potential mapping, risk management, hedging, and securitization, thus distinguishing it qualitatively from simple commodification.[36][37] The "financialization" of the cultural industries compels producers to recognize that the success of their work requires not only artistic and technical excellence but also superior strategies in promotion, marketing, and branding.[38] Satirizing this reality, McRobbie (2004) famously referred to artists as "pioneers of the new economy."[39] Drawing on Foucault´s concept of "self-surveillance," she analyzes how creators in the platform era no longer see themselves as industrial-era laborers but rather model themselves as self-driven, imaginative "entrepreneurs of the self".

In summary, the academic understanding of creativity in the cultural industries has evolved from viewing it as a mystical, individual quality to recognizing it as a complex phenomenon constructed and practiced within social relations, institutions, and the broader political-economic context. Positioned within the tension between commercial control and creative autonomy, creativity has served as a driving force in shaping cultural production toward the maximization of commercial appeal, propelled by globalization and digitalization. Within this trend, the platformization of the cultural industries provides "boundary resources" that control, protect, and homogenize cultural creation, helping creators gauge what is novel and creative, thereby functioning as a framework that encompasses both creativity and commercialism.[40] Furthermore, the financialization of cultural production inseparably integrates creativity and commercialism by assigning creators the identity of self-entrepreneurs rather than laborers. Creative labor in the cultural industries, therefore, is a domain where artistic achievement, economic success, social recognition, and creative ethics are intricately negotiated within social, financial, and ethical contexts.[41] Consequently, understanding the relationship between the structural problems of the cultural industries and creativity necessitates an effort to connect these macro-level dynamics with the lived experiences of creative workers.

3. The Formation of the Korean Studio System and Creativity

The industrialization of television production in South Korea began in the 1990s. In line with global trends in privatization and commercialization sweeping the media industry, South Korea initiated a departure from its long-standing, state-controlled broadcasting system with the launch of private terrestrial, cable, and satellite channels. The government adopted a policy to expand outsourced production, mandating that broadcasters allocate a certain percentage of their programming to independently produced content. This strategy was intended to diversify production entities and strengthen the domestic broadcasting industry´s production capabilities.[42]

New broadcasters and production companies found it necessary to recruit experienced personnel from existing broadcasters to build their own production capacities. However, a significant power imbalance between the dominant terrestrial broadcasters and emerging independent production companies created a formidable barrier to the mobility of broadcast talent. Until the late 2000s, the hegemony of

35 Thomas Poell, David B. Nieborg, and Brooke Erin Duffy, *Platforms and Cultural Production* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2021), 52.

36 Max Haiven, *Cultures of Financialization: Fictitious Capital in Popular Culture and Everyday Life* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

37 Randy Martin, *Financialization of Daily Life* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2002).

38 McRobbie, *Be Creative*.

39 McRobbie, *Everyone Is Creative*.

40 Poell, Nieborg, and Duffy, *Platforms and Cultural Production*, 66.

41 Mark Banks, *Creative Justice: Cultural Industries, Work and Inequality* (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017).

42 Jaeho Cho, *Issues and Improvement Plans for the Outsourcing System of Broadcasting Programs* (Seoul: National Assembly Research Service, 2013).

terrestrial broadcasters remained firmly in place, and persistent issues of unfair contracts and inequitable profit-sharing arrangements continued to plague the industry.

A pivotal event that fundamentally disrupted this unequal power dynamic was the 2009 amendment of the *Broadcasting Act*. This legislative amendment introduced deregulatory measures that, while maintaining broadcasters´ obligations to include a specified percentage of outsourced content, eliminated restrictions on programming quotas for production companies with "special relationships" to broadcasters. By removing caps on subsidiary-produced content, the revision enabled broadcasters to consolidate production capabilities within their corporate networks and secure exclusive control over intellectual property rights. More significantly, it facilitated the emergence of vertically integrated media conglomerates that consolidated production, programming, and distribution operations while establishing horizontal networks across film, performance, and music sectors.

Studio Dragon, the flagship production unit of media conglomerate CJ ENM and widely regarded as the archetype of Korean studio operations, exemplifies this institutional transformation. The company´s establishment directly reflects these broader regulatory and industrial restructuring processes that reshaped the Korean media landscape. Unlike other production companies that typically produce one or two dramas per year, Studio Dragon dramatically increased its output to 15 dramas in 2015, 19 in 2016, and 22 in 2017, and is now known to produce over 30 dramas annually. The studio secured its production capacity by recruiting and capitalizing on renowned drama writers and directors. Through the acquisition of several labels and the use of stock swaps, Studio Dragon´s listing on the KOSDAQ stock market brought substantial returns to its participants. The writers and directors affiliated with the acquired labels became entwined with stock values ranging from tens to hundreds of millions of won, forging even stronger strategic alliances. Studio Dragon´s remarkable success triggered a boom in the establishment of large production studios by other broadcasters, film companies, and major entertainment corporations.

The key distinction between these new studios and existing independent production companies lies in the locus of control over "planning and production," which is now firmly held by the studios rather than the broadcasters.[43][44] Previously, directors, writers, and chief producers affiliated with broadcasters planned and programmed content, which production companies then executed with funds provided by the broadcasters. Consequently, it was taken for granted that the IP belonged to the broadcasters. In contrast, studios, backed by significant financial power, secure the creative talent necessary to lead the entire process from inception to completion. Because these large studios hold an advantage in the core value of creativity, they possess the negotiating power to own or co-own IP rights with broadcasters.

As the domestic content production ecosystem has been reorganized around studios, their growth is clearly reflected in content export statistics. In 2016, the year Studio Dragon was officially launched, the annual export value of the studio sector was a mere $63.9 million. By 2021, this figure had surged to $284.7 million, surpassing the $213.3 million from terrestrial broadcasters and the $219.9 million from cable operators (see Figure 1). The Korean content industry now operates definitively under a studio system.

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Mi Sook Kim, "A Study on Role of Production Company Executive Producer as Drama Producer," *The Journal of the Korea Contents Association* 21 (2021): 286-308.

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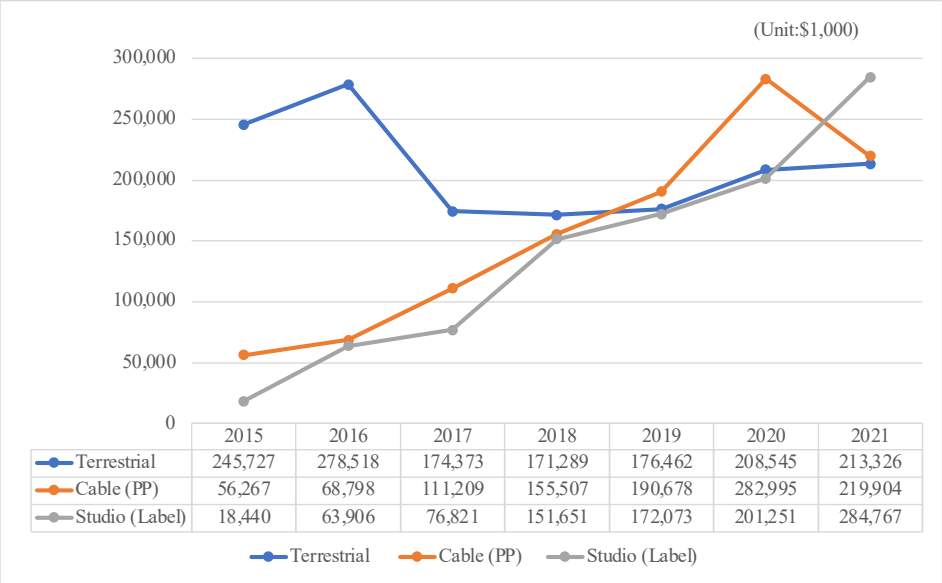
Sungmin Lee, "OTT로 인한 콘텐츠 제작/유통 시스템의 변화: 스튜디오 시스템을 중심으로," *Media Issue & Trend* 51(2022): 6-17.

Figure 1. Trend in the Export Revenue of South Korean Broadcasting Content



Note: Author´s reconstruction from *The Annual Survey of Korean Broadcasting Industry* by Korean Broadcasting Commission (2016 to 2022).

This industrial reorganization, however, is not uniformly advantageous. The increased demand for high-quality content from global OTT platforms has led to longer production periods and fierce competition to secure famous writers and actors. This, in turn, has caused a sharp rise in production costs, intensifying monopolization by a few large production companies that can afford such expenditures.[45][46] Meanwhile, small and medium-sized production companies often have to transfer their IP rights to broadcasters or platforms, making it difficult to secure long-term profits. High production costs have also led to a decrease in programming by domestic broadcasters, who, relying primarily on advertising revenue, find it increasingly difficult to afford production budgets that have grown nearly tenfold. Despite the accolades for supplying popular content to the international market, the Korean broadcasting industry is experiencing a domestic downturn due to a decline in the number of productions.

The unstable business environment of the studios directly affects the creative expression of creators. Moreover, with the studio system being a recent development in Korea, many creators are facing significant changes in working conditions, creative processes, financial compensation, social recognition, and professional ethics as a result of their job mobility. Although existing studies have analyzed the business models of Korean studios[47][48][49] as well as changes in the production environment,[50][51] there remains a notable lack of research focused on how these external structures specifically affect the creative activities of creators and their strategic responses.

This study explores how Korean studios organize creators and how creators, in turn, conduct their creative activities within the studio system and its culture. Through interviews with creators, it examines the differences from their previous organizations and how these changes affect their production practices and attitudes. Based on their responses, this study aims to identify the distinctive characteristics

45 Il-jung Kim and Kenneth Chi Ho Kim, "Competitive Advantage Strategy of CJ ENM's TV Drama Business: Focusing on Resource-Based View," *Korea Humanities Content Society* 55 (2019): 167-97.

46 Munhaeng Lee, "A Study on the Characteristics of the Domestic Drama Production Supply Market: Focusing on the Status of Production Companies," *Journal of Visual Culture & Communication* 19 (2020): 85-115.

47 Daehyun Ju and Sam Hyunjun Park, "Analyzing the Core Competence for the Sustainable Competitive Advantage of the Drama Production Company Studio Dragon," *Journal of Korea Culture Industry Academic* 21, no. 3 (2021): 57-65.

48 Sang Im Kim and Yeong Ju Lee, "Strategic Transformations of Korean Media Companies in the Over-the-top (OTT) Environment: Dynamic Capabilities Perspective." *Journal of Cybercommunication*, 38(3): 5-45.

49 Il-jung Kim, Tae-Young Son and Kenneth Chi Ho Kim, "Expansion of Korean Drama Service on OTT Platforms and the Changes in Strategy of Drama Production Companies: Focusing on Dynamic Capabilities View," *Humanities Contents* 59 (2020): 155-194.

50 Hoijae Kim, "포스트 넷플릭스, 한국 드라마의 전망과 전략," *Broadcasting Culture* 416 (2019): 80-105.

51 Konsik Yu, "넷플릭스가 국내 드라마 시장에 미친 영향: 제작자 심층 인터뷰를 중심으로," *Media Issue & Trend* 40(2020): 46-62.

of creativity within the Korean studio system.

The research questions are as follows:

1. How have the studio system and global OTT platforms transformed the production structure of Korea's broadcasting industry?
2. How does studio-based production affect creators´ labor conditions and creative autonomy?
3. What opportunities and constraints does the studio-centered production system create for creators´ ideation and creative processes?
4. How do Korean content creators conceptualize their roles and creative values within the global OTT-dominated media landscape?

4. Research Methods

The necessity for research on the creativity and production activities of content creators stems primarily from the inherent difficulty of accessing production sites. A broadcast program is the culmination of diverse processes—including planning, scriptwriting, filming, editing, broadcasting, and retransmission—that require the collaboration of numerous production personnel. Consequently, comprehending the creative milieu through a single study is nearly impossible. Without the opportunity to experience or closely observe the creative process firsthand, gaining a nuanced understanding of the practices and challenges of creative labor in broadcast content becomes exceedingly difficult.

The author brings extensive experience in broadcast content creation and management, having worked as a broadcast writer for a terrestrial broadcaster and as the head of an independent production company from 1995 to 2012. This professional background provided the author with access to a long-standing network of current industry creators. The research examines the shifts occurring before and after the introduction of general programming channels and the studio system—key events that signify a structural reorganization of the Korean broadcasting industry. A total of 14 individuals were selected as interview participants, including directors, writers, and producers with more than a decade of production experience, as well as three prospective writers preparing to enter the field of drama writing (see Table 1).

Table 1. Interview Participants´ Information

Participant	Sex	Occupation	Career (years)	Affiliation
A	M	Drama director	24	Nationwide pay television network
B	M	Drama director	22	Self-employed indie label
C	M	Drama director	21	Label affiliated with a big studio
D	M	Variety show producer	29	Middle-sized indie
E	M	Variety show producer	21	Nationwide terrestrial broadcaster
F	M	Variety show producer	14	Label affiliated with a middle-sized studio

G	F	Drama writer	35	Freelancer
H	F	Variety show and drama writer	31	Label affiliated with a big studio
I	F	Drama writer	26	Freelancer
J	F	Variety show writer	24	Freelancer
K	M	Apprentice drama writer	5	Freelancer
L	F	Apprentice drama writer	2	Freelancer
M	M	Financial manager and planning producer	18	Label affiliated with a middle-sized studio
N	F	Planning producer and apprentice drama writer	3	Indie label

As detailed in Table 1, the interview participants comprise eight individuals currently engaged in drama creation, four in entertainment program creation, and two planning producers responsible for securing production funds, accounting, and project management. Their professional experience in the broadcasting industry spans from the preparatory stage to as much as 35 years. With the exception of three prospective writers in their 20s and 30s, the majority of participants are in their 40s to mid-50s.

The interview questions were designed to understand the changes in and responses of creative labor following the structural transformation of the Korean broadcasting industry. The inquiries primarily focused on the creative process, professional practices, organizational culture, and production autonomy. However, the scope of the questions also extended to their motivations for entering the broadcasting industry, their professional goals and vision, and their reasons for changing jobs.

Given the diverse organizational structures, sizes, and contractual forms of the studios, a general overview of the studio system and its contractual relationships was deemed necessary. Participant M, who was directly involved in the establishment of a major studio and currently works as a planning producer overseeing creative projects with directors, writers, and actors, provided this foundational overview through an in-depth interview conducted prior to engaging with the other creators.

The interviews were conducted in two phases: from mid-March to mid-April 2024, and from mid-August to late August 2025. They generally took place at the respondents´ offices, nearby cafés, or the writers´ association office. Due to a scheduling conflict, one interview was conducted via videoconference. The semi-structured interview format allowed for flexibility in questioning based on the respondents´ answers, enabling a deeper exploration of their experiences and thoughts. To facilitate a more informed discussion, interview questions were provided to participants in advance, so they could understand the topics and intentions of the study.

All interviews were recorded and subsequently transcribed for analysis. To derive thematic insights from the responses, the dimensions of broadcast content creative labor were categorized into four distinct domains: 1) contractual relationships and organizational culture; 2) work processes and intensity; 3) the generation, development, and constraints of creative ideas; and 4) creator identity and values.

5. Analysis Results

5.1 *The Benefits of Studios: Financial Compensation and Autonomous Production*

The primary impetus for creators migrating to studios is that studios supply a diverse range of programs to multiple channels and platforms, thereby offering more production opportunities and greater creative autonomy. Participant B, a director who began his career at a terrestrial broadcaster, pointed out that although public broadcasters possess a large pool of production talent, they frequently face budgetary constraints that limit casting choices and aesthetic expression. He also noted that the inefficiencies of such legacy organizations often stifle proactive creative endeavors.

> The tenured staff, with their guaranteed employment, are often reluctant to work diligently. These legacy organizations expend a significant portion of their budget on high-level salaries, which in turn reduces production budgets. Another critical issue is the lack of political independence as a public broadcaster, making it difficult to maintain project continuity. Even when producing a historical drama, the choice of perspective and era is influenced by external factors. This structure impedes our ability to keep pace with a rapidly changing world, which is truly regrettable. (Participant B)

Participant F, who worked at both a general programming channel and a terrestrial broadcaster before moving to a studio, expressed similar sentiments. His decision to transition was influenced by a stark contrast in experiences: one of his proposed programs was never produced due to the broadcaster´s organizational decisions, while another proposal to an OTT platform was successfully brought to fruition.

> The impact of organizational culture on an employee is substantial. When I joined a new cable channel, I was quickly given directing opportunities; just three months after starting as an assistant director, I was producing a 60-minute program. While I had creative freedom, the channel´s recognition and production support were limited. Upon joining a terrestrial broadcaster, I felt the weight of its established system, superior production environment, skilled senior colleagues, and legacy programs. However, opportunities to plan new content were scarcer. Working with Netflix at a studio allows me to fully own my creation, receive significant investment, and communicate with a vast audience—it makes an enormous difference. (Participant F)

Creators often choose studios over freelancing not only because they offer better production opportunities and budget acquisition, but also because they handle negotiations with broadcasters and platforms. A large studio with multiple labels can bundle several proposals to negotiate more effectively, providing individual creators with greater leverage and allowing them to focus solely on their creation. The size and composition of these labels vary significantly; some include writers, directors, planning producers, and actors, while others consist solely of creators from the same professional background. Similar labels are often grouped under a single studio umbrella. A key advantage for creators is the ability to establish a corporation and hold stock, which can lead to substantial financial gains if a project succeeds.

> Previously, creators were typically paid a per-episode fee, but by establishing a corporation, they can hold stock. People set up companies with the goal of acquiring equity. When a project hits big, the profit scale is on a completely different level. Some companies with only personnel and no resources have secured deals worth billions of won to acquire those resources. Financially, it doesn´t make sense. (Participant M)

In addition to financial benefits, creators who become part of a corporation enjoy social security contributions, including national pension, health insurance, employment insurance, and industrial accident insurance. In return, studios pursue multi-label contracts to enhance their valuation through potential future earnings, effectively binding creators to the studio by requiring them to produce multiple works within a specified period. Should other opportunities arise during the contract term, creators may need to seek the studio´s permission to undertake new projects. Notably, creators exhibit a preference for smaller labels, believing that working within small, like-minded groups fosters creativity.

> The core source of drama production lies with the writer, director, and planning producer. It begins with the individual. Only a small number of people can delve deeply into human stories to create something unique. If Samsung had tried to make dramas, wouldn´t they have succeeded long ago? They entered the video production business but soon gave up, because drama production fundamentally starts with the individual. There´s a reason the labels are all established on a small scale. (Participant C)

Creators affiliated with labels contracted to major corporations like Studio Dragon or Studio Lululala exist in a dual relationship, belonging to both a small production company and a large enterprise. They develop ideas and create stories within their small labels, but their work is distributed through the channels of the large corporation, translating success into a rise in stock value. This dual relationship maximizes their economic and social rewards while preserving a degree of creative autonomy.

5.2 *Polarization under Platform Dominance: Transformed Production Processes and Reversed Power Relations*

The television content market, once monopolized by South Korea´s three major terrestrial broadcasters, has now fragmented into a diverse landscape of channels and platforms, precipitating numerous transformations in traditional television genres and formats. The number and length of episodes per series now vary depending on the theme or subject matter. As the volume of productions has increased, competition for viewership and public attention has intensified, shortening the shelf life of individual content. Creators are now acutely aware of the rapid pace of change, as content popularity rankings shift constantly.

Conversely, the average production period has significantly lengthened compared to the past. For dramas, the entire process from writing to broadcast, which previously took approximately six months to a year, now spans a minimum of two to three years and can extend to as long as five to six years. The substantial budgets invested by global OTT services like Netflix in Korean drama production have necessitated longer production timelines to enhance post-production quality. “Full

pre-production" has become a standard practice to ensure rigorous quality control and allow sufficient time for refined translations that align with local sentiments and ethical standards. Furthermore, the implementation of "standard working hours" has ensured that production staff are no longer subjected to the grueling labor conditions of the past, and are now guaranteed adequate rest and sleep.

> When I was an assistant director, I handled everything: budget management, staff payments, casting, logistics, editing, post-production—you name it. My role was to support the directors so they could focus solely on directing. Now, what I used to do alone is divided among about 20 people. Back then, it was possible because dramas had fixed broadcast times and had to be completed no matter what. Production costs weren´t as high, so we didn´t need external funding, and the broadcasters held all the power. It was a system made possible by staff like me sacrificing their well-being. (Participant A)

The advancement and specialization of the broadcast production process have made extended production periods inevitable. Moreover, the demands of global OTT distribution have heightened the importance of quality control, complicating the production process and expanding the scope and sophistication of digital technology use. These developments have become the new production standards, applicable even to non-drama content.

> In the past, we worked excessively. We were the generation that created the multicamera system for entertainment programs, which was unique worldwide. We set a new standard by capturing every participant´s facial expression. While this complicated editing, the advent of nonlinear editing technology dramatically improved the situation. Nowadays, there are specialized data management companies. We provide them with smaller, visually editable proxy files, and they re-link the original sources for mastering. With Netflix´s entry, the complexity of postproduction processes—sound mixing, color correction, data management—has significantly increased. Because Netflix views its IP as a permanent asset, it strives to maintain the highest quality for any potential rerelease. (Participant D)

As production periods lengthen and budgets escalate, the program planning stage requires ever more meticulous consideration. A significant challenge has emerged from the temporal lag between a project´s conception and its broadcast, making it difficult to reflect contemporary social trends or foster interaction between creators and audiences. In this context, the role of the planning producer has grown in importance. Their fundamental task is to read and predict sociocultural trends while skillfully scouting and matching creators with resources. In practice, however, it is more common for star writers or directors to have the authority to choose their partners. Furthermore, the influence of global OTT platforms like Netflix has fostered a belief that actor casting is now more critical than the story itself.

> In the past, programming decisions were made based on a synopsis and the first four scripts. Now, because the risks are higher, a full script is required. The only exceptions are when a *Hallyu* star is cast or the writer has a proven track record of hit dramas. Otherwise, the complete script is mandatory. (Participant B)

> I´ve heard that OTTs maintain separate casting lists for domestic and international markets, ranked from one to one hundred, and sometimes they demand casting choices down to the second-ranked actor. An actor who achieves a 20% viewership rating in Korea might be passed over if they are

> not well-known internationally. Conversely, an idol who gains immense popularity abroad from a single drama can rise to the top of the list. Idols are frequently cast because if a program doesn´t sell overseas, it doesn´t generate significant profit. Domestic viewers might criticize producers for casting actors who can´t act well, but it´s all geared toward the global market. (Participant H)

Global OTT services have fundamentally altered the power dynamics between creators and actors. Writers and directors, who traditionally held casting authority, must now adhere to the platform´s demands, sometimes delaying production for one or two years to accommodate the schedules of top-tier actors. With the exception of a small cohort of star creators, an actor´s fame is now emphasized over storytelling prowess in the current environment.

The segmented production process, extended timelines, and the heightened influence of actors on scheduling have collectively diminished the role of directors. Apart from a few star directors, it has become standard practice for most directors to be brought in solely for the filming phase, rather than being involved from the initial planning stages. Upon completion of filming, they move on to the next project. This has resulted in the director´s exclusion from the core storytelling and planning process—a domain traditionally centered around the writer-director partnership—with their position now often filled by the production company´s planning producer.

> Previously, since directors were affiliated with the broadcaster, they were responsible for the entire process, including scheduling. I would choose a writer, build a rapport, and we would work as a team with a sense of shared purpose. Now, it´s common for a director to be assigned after the scheduling and even the casting has been finalized. In essence, the director intervenes after the drama´s story is already largely configured, leaving them with little influence over the planning or narrative direction. To make a living, directors have to move from one project to the next, turning the work into something like a factory line. This has left writers feeling very isolated, as they no longer have a partner to fight alongside them when the production company or broadcaster demands unreasonable changes. (Participant A)

The studio-centric production system has brought significant changes not only to the role of the director but also to the burdens placed upon writers. Since production is no longer handled directly by broadcasters, who own the channels, it is commonplace for writers to revise their synopses and initial scripts dozens of times before securing a programming slot. Because this process can be lengthy, production companies often seek out less experienced writers, who are less costly and more pliable, to develop stories. Indeed, Participant K, a writer who won a screenwriting competition and signed a contract for a miniseries, has yet to debut after five years in the field. The team was ultimately disbanded after failing to secure production funding during the story development phase. This predicament is not limited to new writers. Participant G, a veteran drama writer with a 35-year career and a string of high-rating hits, recounted a similar experience.

> I worked in an era when writer power was at its peak. If I said not to cut a scene, even the director couldn´t touch it. If actors had complaints, they would accept my reasoning. But nowadays, writing contracts include a clause requiring revisions until the programming entity—be it a broadcaster or an OTT—gives its approval. I can tolerate some minor revisions after a show is greenlit, but when they demand endless changes to the synopsis from the very beginning, it becomes unbearable. I´ve even had to void contracts because of it. (Participant G)

Even after a drama is greenlit, the writer´s burden does not ease. Under the "full pre-production" system, it is routine to revise already completed scripts. Since feedback cannot be immediately incorporated into the storyline once production is finished, it is sometimes necessary to film multiple versions of a scene and select the final cut during editing. Although the foundation of storytelling relies heavily on the writer´s idea and synopsis, numerous methods and techniques have been developed to supplement this process. A system introduced to solve the chronic problem of last-minute "page-scripts" and enhance program quality has, ironically, trapped writers in a cycle of endless revisions.

> In the past, the writer held the most power—the saying was, ´The writer is everything in a drama.´ But now, it feels like the writer has become the weakest link. When production was rushed, writing skill was paramount. But with full pre-production, there´s more time for script revisions, so it´s become a job anyone can do." (Participant H)

In sum, the emergence of global OTT platforms and the introduction of the studio system have fundamentally transformed Korea´s broadcasting production environment. While extended production schedules, increased budgets, and the implementation of "full pre-production" and "standard working hours" have yielded positive outcomes in terms of production process advancement and improved labor conditions, these changes have simultaneously triggered a reorganization of power dynamics within production organizations. Creative control, once held by writers and directors, has now shifted to global platforms and production companies, with star actor-casting for overseas markets increasingly overshadowing the importance of storytelling. Consequently, many writers and directors face a paradoxical situation where they are marginalized during the planning phase and subjected to endless revision demands and employment instability, thereby intensifying the precariousness of the creative ecosystem.

5.3 *Securing and Constraining Creativity: The Dilemma of Idea Generation and Development*

As global OTT services have come to dominate programming with their vast subscriber bases, investment has become concentrated in blockbuster productions supplied to Netflix, making it increasingly difficult to produce mid-sized dramas. Furthermore, as Netflix shifts its focus to regions where content can be produced more affordably after having driven up production costs in South Korea, a sense of crisis is growing among creators. Most respondents expressed deep concern over the rapid contraction of the domestic broadcast production environment due to Netflix´s monopolistic power.

> Thus far, new and innovative breakthroughs have emerged from competition. But in any market where competition ceases to exist and a monopolist takes control, decline is inevitable. (Participant B)

> I believe our domestic drama ecosystem has been destroyed as it gained more popularity overseas. Initially, we created dramas pursuing our own unique entertainment value, but these days, everyone is preoccupied with how a project will sell abroad, and the ecosystem has been ruined. It´s now commonplace for productions to be canceled simply because they aren´t deemed marketable

overseas. (Participant H)

Amid a pervasive sense of crisis regarding the shrinking production opportunities and the potential exhaustion of creativity in the Korean broadcast market, efforts to find breakthroughs with new stories persist. Content production begins with the creation of a foundational storyline, but the small number of proven hit-making writers and extended writing periods make it difficult to establish a stable pool of talented writers. As an alternative, studios are actively discovering new writers and purchasing the rights to popular webtoons (webcomics) and web novels.

Webtoons and web novels, having been validated by a large domestic and international readership through global platforms, can guarantee a certain level of viewership when adapted into dramas. They not only provide fresh stories by exploring more diverse genres and experimental themes compared to traditional publications but also offer visualized characters and worldviews, which facilitates the establishment of a visual concept for screen adaptation. Consequently, webtoons have become an essential reference for writers and directors seeking to stay abreast of the latest trends in storytelling and imagery. Furthermore, dramas based on webtoons or web novels can be expanded into various other media, such as films and games, thereby maximizing their IP value. It is also easier to secure production investment from major domestic IT corporations that own the webtoon and web novel platforms.

> Every two weeks, our studio distributes an IP newsletter to our affiliated writers, directors, and planning producers. We review a variety of newly released webtoons, web novels, books, and essays from that period. Then, we ask them to submit proposals if they find something they want to produce. (Participant M)

Competition among studios to acquire the rights to popular webtoons and web novels is fierce. Some original creators are not content with merely selling their rights and instead take on the screenwriting themselves. In such cases, they are often supported by an assistant writer until the script is completed. This reservoir of webtoons and web novels, which continuously supplies diverse genres and themes, is likely one key reason why Korean dramas, with their fresh subject matter and expressive power, are highly regarded in the global market.

However, drama writers and directors on the front lines of adaptation report that the narrative development of webtoons and web novels differs significantly from that of dramas, necessitating substantial additional work to adapt even the most popular works for the screen.

> Planning producers are often instructed to bring in proposals based on webtoons or web novels, but even with famous ones, the main plot that drives the story is often very weak. A drama needs a strong central plot with new episodes unfolding in each installment, but it´s hard to find original works with enough material to fill that need. Most of them rely on psychological descriptions or illustrations, and focusing on those elements makes the drama tedious. So, to fill in the substance, we end up adding other events, and inevitably, we face criticism that the drama has damaged the original work. (Participant N)

While securing diverse and experimental stories through webtoons and web novels serves as one strategy to sustain the domestic drama production ecosystem—which has been weakened by the monopolistic influence of global OTTs—it is also

true that a creative dilemma arises from the fundamental differences between the narrative structures of these web-based content and dramas. Ultimately, for Korean dramas to maintain their global competitiveness while preserving their unique creativity, it is necessary to move beyond a simple reliance on popular original works. This requires fostering creative talent with the expertise to understand and effectively translate narrative characteristics across different media, alongside innovation in the production system itself.

Whereas dramas focus on creating stories that reflect popular tastes and the latest trends, entertainment programs tend to concentrate on developing new formats. In entertainment programming, a format substitutes for a script, designing a specific situation within which the cast´s performance unfolds naturally. However, the conceptualization of an idea depends heavily on the platform or channel through which the program will be distributed, which inevitably changes the direction of program planning.

> In the past, the goal was to draw viewers to their television sets. But now, with the diversification of platforms, we have to consider what content to create for which target platform. The more choices we have, the more uncertain we become. We first have to consider whether to target TV, YouTube, or an OTT platform like Netflix. We deliberate more over which platform to choose than over which genre to select. (Participant E)

Netflix prefers entertainment programs with genre-specific characteristics similar to those of dramas and films. Genre content possesses a narrow but loyal audience base, which helps guarantee a baseline viewership when distributed globally. This is why production companies targeting Netflix focus on developing formats in specific genres like mystery thrillers, dating, and survival shows. YouTube, a space where all forms of video compete, inevitably sees lighter and more provocative content attract attention. Broadcasters with limited production budgets favor “low-cost, high-efficiency” programs, leading to a proliferation of travel or food-related content featuring celebrities, which requires no elaborate setup or specific format. For long-term production, however, developing original content is crucial. Owning content IP enhances a production company´s value and allows creators to continuously refine the formats they have developed.

> The important question is whether we can leverage that IP for other businesses. Even if not, having a format makes it easier to introduce variations. We prefer programs that can be continuously developed from a basic structure rather than creating something new every time. We call a format ´alive´ when the initial setup can keep expanding with new elements and characters, allowing us and the cast to grow together. (Participant D)

Participant D, who runs a production company specializing in entertainment programs, stated that producing content with its own IP is a way to increase the company´s value—a strategy realized through collaboration with Netflix. According to him, since the early days of its OTT business, Netflix has been continuously searching for the optimal combination to create mega-hit content to enhance its corporate valuation. This practice continued when it launched its service in Korea. Combining familiar genres or formats with famous actors, based on Netflix´s viewership data, is part of this valuation effort. Once a series is developed, new elements and variations can be continually introduced to maintain freshness.

> In Season 1, our goal was to show our content to as many unknown international viewers as possible across 190 countries. By Season 2, we realized from the data and feedback that ´this country doesn´t watch our program at all, this country enjoys it very much, this country felt it was lacking in this aspect.´ Considering such feedback makes you think more practically, rationally, and strategically. But it also adds the pressure of having to satisfy all these aspects, which can be quite stifling. (Participant F)

Participant F, who supplied a program to Netflix, said that viewership data provides concrete guidelines for storytelling. He strives to reflect audience feedback as much as possible in idea development and expression. In the past, minute-by-minute TV ratings were the standard for evaluating and planning TV programs, but now, the detailed viewership data generated by platforms—categorized by region, gender, and age—guides the conception and development of content.

5.4 *The Ethical Value of Creation: The Creator as Comforter*

The fact that Korean television content is now simultaneously broadcast worldwide via global OTT platforms, enabling creators to receive feedback from audiences of diverse backgrounds, represents a paradigm shift in their professional experience. Audiences once deemed unimaginable are now within reach. Creators of Korean content, now distributed under the umbrella of *Hallyu* (the Korean Wave), often find the accompanying titles of *Hallyu* writer or *Hallyu* director to be awkward. They expressed complex emotions regarding the international reception, which was neither intended nor anticipated.

> Doesn´t a work become a *´Hallyu* piece´ simply by gaining popularity overseas? People are not watching Korean dramas because they are Korean; they are watching enjoyable dramas on Netflix. (...) While there may be *Hallyu* stars, there is no such thing as a *´Hallyu* director.´ One could classify directors based on overseas sales, but then some might also call me a director specializing in melodramas. (Participant B)

> While there are pros and cons, my fundamental approach to content creation has not changed. For example, I always deliberate over which of three ideas in my mind will be the most popular, but I do not consider which one will perform better internationally. I only think about which story will resonate most deeply with a general audience. (Participant H)

While the drama writers and directors expressed appreciation for the positive international reception of Korean content, they did not feel it significantly influenced their creative process. This response stood in some contrast to that of entertainment program creators, who, working with shorter production cycles and seasonal formats, are more conscious of public evaluation when producing sequels. Conversely, the longer production timelines for dramas make it difficult to predict and align with public trends. Despite these differences across genres, the respondents generally did not feel constrained by the "Hallyu" label. They believed their content gained popularity not because it was uniquely Korean, but because it told stories with universal resonance.

> I don´t know much about foreign audiences. We simply tell the universal stories we have experienced.

> It´s not that our work is interesting because it´s *Hallyu*; it´s because we tell stories about universal human emotions that foreigners also possess. (Participant B)

> For me, content that can be discussed by many people is fundamentally meaningful. I believe that content which sparks widespread discussion can genuinely influence the world in a healthier direction. (Participant F)

What, then, constitutes a "universal story that many people can relate to"? And why do such narratives seem particularly distinctive to Korean creators? Respondents indicated that while their stories appear "Korean" due to Korean protagonists and the incorporation of Korea´s unique historical or social contexts, the narratives themselves resonate with both domestic and international audiences because they follow universal human emotions such as family bonds and love. However, they noted that the protagonists in their stories are not powerful heroes but ordinary citizens who resist authority or structural forces, suggesting that this characteristic may distinguish Korean content from other forms of media.

> In the West, there´s a formula for the hero narrative, right? But for us, the narrative of the individual character seems essential. The hero narrative often relies on a Superman saving the planet. But we have characters who would say, ´Who are you to protect me?´ They possess a sense of pride, strive to better themselves and be more diligent, and forge their own narratives within challenging environments. (Participant E)

> Korea has a painful history of colonial rule, war, division, and dictatorship. Acknowledging and healing this pain is powerful and, I think, quite remarkable. We have a history of making films to confront problems from the outset. Even in the 1980s, there were high-quality activist films. Because of that tradition, there is an ethos of seeking solutions and pursuing healing when problems arise. (...) We should applaud the sensibilities with which creators have tackled such themes, and I believe the success of Korean drama is due to those efforts. (Participant B)

Respondents who identified the inspiring struggles of ordinary people, rather than the sagas of great heroes, as a hallmark of successful Korean TV content unanimously stated that these were the kinds of stories they had aspired to create from the very beginning of their careers. Despite decades of technological and industrial change, their fundamental approach to creation has remained largely unchanged since they first entered the field of broadcast production.

> When choosing a career, I thought about what kind of work would be most valuable. Films, dramas, and other content can stir a viewer´s emotions and values in just 30 to 90 minutes. They can be entertaining, comforting, and relaxing. I realized that this held great value (...) and I thought it would be fascinating to create something that could move people´s hearts. (Participant C)

> I find small stories about ordinary people like myself, who receive less of the spotlight, more interesting than grand narratives featuring celebrities. I became a director because I felt it was more meaningful to tell those kinds of stories. (...) The works I am currently producing fall within that scope. None of our cast members are superstars. I think that is my creative value. (Participant F)

The phrase "solace through inspiration and positive influence" encapsulates the respondents´ reasons for choosing their profession. A simple desire to share with others the comfort they themselves received from watching television or movies

guided them into their careers as creators, and this remains their guiding principle. Although the influence of global OTTs like YouTube and Netflix has led to audience segmentation based on preferences and a focus on more provocative content with clear appeal, the sincerity and authenticity of creators who wish to move the public remain an indispensable value.

6. Discussion and Conclusion

The expansion of global OTT services and the introduction of the studio system have brought about a paradigm shift in the creative environment for Korean television content. As global OTT platforms, equipped with substantial production budgets and worldwide distribution networks, have concentrated their investments in blockbuster projects, large studios established by major broadcasters have invested heavily to attract top-tier creative talent capable of producing killer content. This new environment has presented creators with both unprecedented opportunities and significant challenges, profoundly influencing the ways in which they express their creativity.

First, the advent of global OTT services and the establishment of the studio system have fundamentally reshaped the production structure and power relations within the Korean broadcasting industry. Creators have migrated from broadcasters to studios in pursuit of more production opportunities, greater autonomy, and better financial compensation. In turn, studios leverage their multiple labels to enhance their negotiating power with platforms, providing an environment where creators can focus solely on their work. Within production teams, power dynamics have reversed even more dramatically. As casting *Hallyu* stars has become the foremost consideration for global market success, the influence of actors has come to overshadow the importance of the story, while the casting authority and storytelling roles of writers and directors have diminished.

Second, the advancement of the production process has yielded both positive and negative outcomes for the labor environment of creators. The adoption of "full pre-production" and "standard working hours" has led to a more systematic, specialized, and segmented production process, enhancing quality control and raising the overall completeness of the content. However, the lengthened post-production phase has resulted in situations where both directors and writers find their creative autonomy compromised or feel marginalized from the planning and creative processes.

Third, the increasing dependence on the global market has created a crisis within the domestic production ecosystem and has altered the methods of idea generation. With "marketability overseas" now a key criterion for greenlighting projects, the production of mid-sized experimental dramas and unique ideas rooted in domestic sentiment has become increasingly difficult, leading to a reduction in both production diversity and opportunities. To overcome this, there is a distinct trend toward utilizing web-based content that features diverse genres and experimental themes, as well as developing strategic storytelling based on data provided by platforms.

Finally, despite these external environmental changes, the creators maintained a consistent identity regarding their roles and creative values. Although pressure to produce content with the global market in mind has increased, creators have sustained an ethical commitment to moving and comforting the public through universal human emotions and empathy. Respondents stated they focus on creating

stories with universal appeal rather than intentionally targeting foreign markets. They perceive Korea´s unique historical and social context as the wellspring for narratives about ordinary individuals overcoming adversity, a theme that resonates deeply. The belief that authentic stories of ordinary people remain a core value of creation, even in an era saturated with provocative content, persists.

Based on the preceding analysis, this study has examined how the introduction of the studio system mediates, induces, and transforms the creativity of creators, and considers its sociocultural implications. First, it was confirmed that the studio system functions as a "dual mechanism," providing creators with unprecedented economic opportunities while simultaneously constraining their creative autonomy. The emergence of the studio structure has transformed content production from a purely creative activity into an endeavor primarily aimed at increasing financial value through stock prices, IP acquisition, and investment procurement. In this process, global platforms have been identified as the key mechanism shaping new industrial standards and power structures across the entire content lifecycle, from planning to consumption. These changes manifest differently depending on the creator´s role and experience, fundamentally reorganizing the existing creative ecosystem.

The Korean studio system has formed a distinctive dual structure for mediating creativity. Small-scale labels function as "incubators of creativity," ensuring creative autonomy based on the deep exploration of individuals. In contrast, large-scale studios act as "amplifiers of creativity," converting creative ideas into industrial value by combining them with capital. While this represents an attempt to pursue both creative autonomy and industrial efficiency, it inevitably creates a tension between creative control and economic success.

Furthermore, this study confirmed that during the establishment of the Korean studio system, the traditional writer-director-centric power structure has been reorganized around a platform-casting-capital axis, leading to a differential shift in the status of creators. Notably, writers have been relegated to the "weakest link in the power relationship," suffering under a "cycle of endless revisions," while directors are often excluded from the planning process and assigned to "factory-line labor." This signifies a structural shift in which the locus of creative decision-making has moved from individual creators to platforms and capital.

In terms of the direction of creativity, the studio system powerfully orients creative endeavors toward the potential for success in the global market. With the prioritization of *Hallyu* star casting and data-driven strategic creation becoming standardized, a structural constraint has formed where, from the very first stage of creation, "who stars in it" takes precedence over "what the story is about." This internalization of global market logic is accepted as an unavoidable choice for international expansion, even as it creates a disconnect with the sentiments of domestic audiences.

It is also necessary to note the phenomenon where the creative output is being transformed from a "work of art" into an "IP asset," thereby redefining the meaning of creative activity from the "creation of new stories" to the "successful adaptation of existing IP." The increased reliance on web content is a rational choice to reduce investment risk through proven stories, but it also creates a new creative dilemma arising from the narrative differences between the original works and their adaptations.

The most concerning phenomenon identified in this study is the alienation of writers and directors—the core subjects of the creative process. If production

practices that reduce creators to passive agents who merely conform to the system´s demands become entrenched, this will inevitably lead to a structural problem that threatens the sustainability of the Korean content ecosystem, extending beyond the issues of individual creators. The "hollowing out of the middle" due to the concentration of investment in blockbusters reduces opportunities for experimental and original content. Creators´ unconscious self-censorship, in turn, poses a significant risk of excluding narratives that capture the unique context of Korean society, leading to the mass production of homogenized "global standard" content.

As defined by Poell, Nieborg, and Duffy (2021),[52] Korean writers and directors are also developing stories and formats based on audience data provided by platforms and are striving to create original IP to enhance corporate value. However, their creativity cannot be reduced solely to commercial success; it secures its persuasive power as popular art by communicating and empathizing with the public through "authenticity." The recognition that it is the creator´s duty to comfort the public by focusing on the hopes and efforts of ordinary people was confirmed to be the essence of the creativity that underpins the *Hallyu* phenomenon.

The creative values and ethics of Korean creators may be a generational characteristic. The respondents, who spent their youth from the 1990s to the mid-2000s, belong to a generation that experienced sociocultural freedom and diversity as political democratization spread across various fields. They sublimated their attempts to resist and challenge the existing order into cultural achievements. Whether this storytelling value can be defined as representative of *Hallyu* and whether it will persist for future generations of creators requires further research.

This study explored how Korean content is produced from the creators´ perspective and what differentiates it from the content of other countries. Unlike previous studies that sought to identify the factors behind the popularity of *Hallyu* content, this research holds significance in its comprehensive analysis of changing creative conditions, content planning and development processes, organizational culture, economic compensation, professional identity, and creative values, with a specific focus on creativity.

However, this study has limitations in that it primarily targeted a select group of high-level creators, namely writers and directors, and thus does not encompass the entire spectrum of the broadcast content creation collective. Although content creation involves a much broader range of fields, including cinematography, editing, acting, and special effects, the voices of these staff members were not included. Furthermore, the creativity of junior staff in low-wage, precarious employment situations was only partially reflected and not sufficiently considered. Future research should address these limitations to provide a more comprehensive understanding.

In conclusion, this study confirms that the Korean studio system is a sophisticated model that efficiently combines creativity with industrial success. However, in this process, the locus of creative control is being transferred to capital and platforms, creating a paradoxical situation where creators are offered the "opportunity for success" in exchange for their "creative control." This phenomenon presents a structural dilemma that could, in the long term, weaken the essential values of Korean content´s core competitiveness: the narrative of "ordinary individuals confronting adversity" and "solace through universal empathy." Therefore, for the sustainable development of the industry, it is necessary to develop a new governance model that seeks a balance between economic performance and creative autonomy. This entails establishing institutional mechanisms through which creators, capital,

52 Poell, Nieborg, and Duffy, *Platforms and Cultural Production*.

and platforms can preserve the intrinsic value of creativity through mutual checks and collaboration. A balanced approach that seeks to maintain the identity of the creator, despite the new threat of monopolistic dominance by global OTTs, will be the key factor in sustaining the global success of Korean content.

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AI use for English editing

Generative AI (ChatGPT, OpenAI) was used solely to improve English clarity and style at the author´s direction. The author reviewed and edited all outputs and is responsible for the final text. No AI tool was used to generate, analyse, or interpret empirical results.

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